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Service to Slovak creates love for America

by Sarah Hubbard, Propulsion Directorate

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Ohio — Fred Eisert of the Air Force Research Laboratory Propulsion Directorate knows the true meaning of the words “You never know what you have until it’s gone.” He’s lived it through a two-year reserve deployment to the Slovak Republic, an experience that taught him just how much of daily American life he’s taken for granted.

Like most Americans, he watched war and destruction on TV, often not realizing it was happening in someone’s back yard. He heard about famine and economic crises on the radio while surrounded by bountiful farming communities and middle-income families. After living through his deployment, he is today a changed man.

“It was a wake-up call for me,” he said. “People in Slovakia got by without material things such as automobiles, TVs, and hot water, yet they had such a positive outlook on life. They always had social gatherings and stopped to talk to whomever happened to pass by. I remember going to someone’s apartment with the intention of staying for just a moment – but the person at the door greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and a platter full of food, customary of their culture.”

How he came by his life-changing experience is an interesting story. In April 2002, Mr. Eisert, a Lt. Col. in the reserves, was assigned as a bilateral affairs officer, departing for U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, his home base for the next two years.

In his position, Mr. Eisert assessed and trained the Slovak military in U.S. military tactics. He also determined what types of training were needed, ranging from combat tactics/logistics to non-commissioned officer development, administered with help from the Slovak government. The training also focused on specific skills used to support the Global War on Terrorism, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

His most memorable experiences and lessons came while doing humanitarian assistance, primarily focused on a minority group called the Romas, thought to have come from India hundreds of years ago and discriminated against because of their dark skin, unusual dialect and high illiteracy rate.

The first order of business was building two primary schools for their community. Equipped with kitchen, toilet facilities and showers, the schools became a haven for the children, who at home did not necessarily get fed or bathed everyday. The U.S. government also provided furnishings for the buildings and outside organizations provided teachers.

Additionally, even though local custom dictated that students and teachers chop wood daily to fill a stove in the school, Mr. Eisert eventually convinced the building contractor to install central heating. He also promoted construction of a clean, safe water supply system because most of the water throughout the region was contaminated.

“The schools were one of the kindest things we could have done for that community,” said Mr. Eisert. “Everyone was very appreciative and held a big opening ceremony for the school, whose teachers were remarkably dedicated. I remember walking into the building on an extremely cold day, long after all of the kids had left, and seeing teachers who were still planning the next day’s classes.”

Comparing a day in Slovakia to an average American day, Mr. Eisert said living in such a society was a whole new experience. “The people are much poorer in that part of Europe,” he said. “The average household income is \$300 to \$400 per month and the cost of living is not much lower than here. Some of the bigger towns only suffered a 6 to 7 percent unemployment rate, but some villages had unemployment rates as high as 99 percent.”

The reason the Slovakian economy is recovering so slowly, Mr. Eisert said, has roots in its recently dissolved communistic society. Under that system, society was classless, all businesses were owned by

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the government, and even a majority of the housing was the same — panel locks — tall concrete apartments usually with one bedroom and a bathroom that lined villages and sometimes provided housing for more than 70,000 people.

Mr. Eisert returned home with many memories and lessons. Some of the most vivid ones include feeling illiterate as he tried to learn the language, spending the night in a hospital with busted-out windows in the winter and waking in a snow-filled bed, and a doctor he met in Serbia who had survived bombing raids and now makes about \$400 per month.

“Those two years taught me more about life than any other experience I’ve had,” Mr. Eisert said. “They also gave me a greater appreciation for all the things I had assumed were the norm. I’ve never met such a thankful group of people — not necessarily thankful for all that they had, because they didn’t have much at all — but just for getting the chance to live.” @